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The Scent of Bitter Almonds

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The Scent of Bitter Almonds

Writing Process

I was asked to write this project for my English 100 class. I was supposed to describe my own journey learning to read and write and to tell the literacy sponsors that help me to improve my reading and writing skills. The aspect that I really enjoyed about this project was the fact that we had to write a literacy narrative. As I see it, this kind of production is the most enjoyable and I had a great time while writing it. I talked to my parents and teachers at high school and I had a reunion with my inner self remembering the path I followed to get to where I am now. I am Spanish and for that reason my learning journey could be a little different to the rest. Although my mother tongue is Spanish, I also grew up learning English and in this paper I try describe how I dealt with these two languages. In conclusion, in this literacy narrative I try to explain with a bit of humor the path I had to go through in order to achieve the writing and reading skills that I own nowadays.

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Meredith Doench

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The Scent of Bitter Almonds*

I like the idea of how certain factors are able to transport us to different moments of our lives. It amazes me how taking a photo can materialize an instant that we are not allowed to own because time does not belong to anybody. We use our cameras and that's it. We continue living our lives, and twenty years later we will cry or laugh remembering tons of anecdotes while we glance over the photo album. Then, on the other hand, there are also certain aromas and smells which remind us of distinct situations. For example, the perfume that mom has been using for more than fifteen years (because when something works well there is no need to change it) or the smell of paella at grandma's house every Sunday.

What is behind a scent? How does the connection smells-memories work? I like the smell of brewed coffee due to its reassuring aroma, the essence of lavender because it reminds me of my hometown, and the scent of Yankee Candles, which are those fragrances which the urbanites who do not like the countryside but appreciate its smell used to buy. In addition, I love the scent of bitter almonds, which it is actually a smell that I am not sure if I have ever tasted, however, I like it because it appears in the first sentence of *Love in the Time of Cholera* from Gabriel García Márquez, a book that my father used to read to me over and over again when I was a child. (*"It was inevitable: the scent of bitter almonds always reminded him of the fate of unrequited love."*) Shortly after, that book became my favorite, and I could spend hours reading it laying on the floor of my father's library surrounded by tons of bookshelves. Actually, I think that is my favorite smell. The essence of old and new

books hanging out together. The essence of literacy hanging out alone in one room. The smell of my childhood.

My father is a Spanish literature professor and he has always tried to transmit to me his passion for reading and writing, so we used to spend so much time reading together (don't worry daddy, you have definitely achieved it). At first, he always read adventure stories aloud because they were our favorites. I remember how I stared flabbergasted at my father while I listened to the stories of the thousands of expeditions of Odysseus until he got to his homeland and the courage of Captain Alariste. The bad part of all of this was that our battles always ended when our general called us from the kitchen announcing that dinner was ready when I was still craving to know what happened in the next chapter.

"Teach me how to tell those amazing stories, daddy," I used to say to my father.

"Be patient, honey. You will learn someday," he answered.

But what he did not know was that by that day, Mrs. Ana, my teacher at school, has already introduced me to Mr. E, Mrs. A, and all their children: the fatty O, the skinny I, and the flexible U. After them I met all their vassals, and the teacher asked us to buy some notebooks in which we copied all the letters over and over again for several months. I had a lot of fun with my friends making competitions to see who had the most beautiful handwriting, and that was how one day we changed our roles and it became me who read aloud to my father. Mrs. Ana encouraged my parents to keep inciting me to read because she thought I had reached a special sensitive skill thanks to my home readings.

I was growing up and when I was eleven I started to feel interested in poetry. I discovered that there are people who write very beautiful words, and at twelve years old I already dreamt that someone wrote them to me. Moreover, I wanted it to be me who touched

hearts with the beauty of the word in Spanish so I decided to start writing my own poems. The truth is that at first it began like a game but then writing became a platform of escape from the world and of reunion with myself. I used to spend the afternoons in my backyard throwing a tennis ball against a wall and making up stories in my head. Furthermore, I still do it. Hurling the ball inspires me in a way that I could start writing a novel right there. As I am doing it, my thoughts start to fly as the ball does, and I get thousands of ideas and dialogues and characters... I travel to my own world.

When I moved to England for three years I felt the necessity of writing in Spanish every day because I had the sensation that I was “forgetting” my own language. I consider it was normal given the fact that I did not have contact with any Spanish speaker but my parents when I phoned them once a week.

“We miss you so much darling! Don’t forget we love you like crazy! What did you have for lunch?” my mother shouted at the phone as she thought her voice would not actually get through the phone but through the air crossing the 1,300 km of distance from Madrid to Oxford.

“I miss you too, mommy!” I exclaimed with my pretend British accent. “Today I had bread with... hmm... hmm...” I muttered as I was trying to find the word in Spanish for “butter.”

Oh my God. I had completely forgotten the word. How could you do this, girl?! You are more Spanish than tortilla, bullfighting, and flamenco together! How could you forget how to say butter in your own language?! I was out of my mind, so I started to read in Spanish even more than before to not forget the charm of my marvelous mother tongue. In that time I read a lot of poetry and Latin American literature. I took advantage of every moment I had to read: in the bus going to school, breaks between classes, meal time... the

more books I read, the more wise I found myself. At night, while everybody was sleeping, I brought out the huge and ridiculously expensive journal that I bought one rainy and nostalgic afternoon in that little shop on the corner of High Street and started to write my adventures in the city of dreaming spires being inspired by the tons of different styles of the books I read. Then, I sent some parts of my work to my father who always joked about reading them in public in front of their students at university.

Three years later I came back to Madrid with a heart full of memories and stories to tell. During my junior and senior year at high school, I took Latin and Greek to avoid seeing myself face to face with my not so beloved Mathematics and Physics. In other words, I chose those subjects not because I want to study them but because I was not willing to suffer another year losing my mind among equations and square roots. How could I have known that those two “death languages” would bring me to a world of knowledge and literacy, becoming one of the topics I am most interested about. Maybe it was because I had an incredible teacher who knew how to share with me his passion for the subjects, but the truth is that I graduated from high school considering really seriously the possibility of studying Classical languages at college. Eventually I chose Politics and Translation, but two years after I still keep in touch with this teacher who used to say that Latin helps us to have our heads screwed on right. Studying these two Spanish ancestors made me understand better my mother language assimilating the origin of the words and wondering where they come from.

Now that I am living in the United States I hope I can improve my reading and writing skills in English without putting Spanish aside. As I see it, this year abroad is going to be an incredible opportunity for me to become fluent in English. I have walked a long literacy way to get where I am right now, however, I am conscious I still have so much more to learn in this path. Thanks to the many books I have read during my life, the influence of my father and Latin and Greek teacher, and the years living abroad, which I consider my sponsors, I

strongly believe that I have achieved the literacy level I own right now. Nonetheless, I will keep enjoying a good book every time I get the chance and, of course, writing vertiginous chimeras while I think of the scent of bitter almonds, which I imagine that smells as the hair of the boy you like. Across the Atlantic my father keeps calling me every night to read me the first sentence of my favorite book, just like when I was a little girl who dreamt of princes with Colombian accents from the books of García Márquez.

“Era inevitable: el olor de las almendras amargas le recordaba siempre el destino de los amores contrariados” my father reads to me every night “and never stop writing, dearie”

Don’t worry daddy, I never will.

***This essay received the *Barbara Farrelly Award for Best Writing of the Issue*.**